

Laying down our lives

John 3:16 is one of the most famous verses in all of scripture “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” It gives us a great summary of the good news of Jesus of what Jesus has done – that God loved us so much, he saved us by giving up his son.

In a nice coincidence, 1 John 3:16, gives us a similar message – “we know love by this, that he laid down his life for us” but then it goes a step further, by telling us how we need to respond to that love “and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

And you’ll know that wonderful verse from earlier in John’s gospel where Jesus says something remarkably similar, too, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11)

Jesus is the shepherd, the good shepherd. And he gives us all we need – as Psalm 23 tells us we shall not want. And he has laid down his life for us.

And here in our gospel reading today, Jesus says “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13)

We are often reminded, especially at Easter, what it meant for Jesus to lay down his life for us: He was betrayed, he was abandoned, he was beaten, humiliated and crucified.

And we were reminded on ANZAC day particularly of people literally laying down their lives for their friends. Often these days, the narrative is that they were fighting for freedom and defending our way of life. But at the time, they generally held they went to fight for empire, for king and country.

But perhaps even more than that, in their first-hand experience of war, was that they were fighting for their mate next to them in the trench – or in the jungle, or the ship, or the plane, or the prisoner of war camp. No matter what the greater motivation may have been for war, they were very much laying down their lives for the friends.

So when we read in chapter three of his first letter that John says “...we ought to lay down our lives for one another” It can be more than a little bit scary. Does he mean that we are called to die for others, just like Jesus did?

Does God want us to die? There are examples, of course, into recent times, of people dying for Jesus. Either because of their faith in him, or as a result of their faith in him.

But the truth is that God doesn’t want us to die.

Going back to John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”

God doesn’t want us to die. Instead, he wants us to live.

“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

And as we live, God wants us to lay down our lives for one another – not die for them, but live for them.

We don't need to die for others, because Jesus has already done just that. He took the burdens of our sins on himself, and he died for us. He died in our place. And in his death, he conquered sin and death.

Jesus died, so that we don't have to – Jesus has been all the way through death into everlasting life.

If we properly follow Jesus' teaching that "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." we won't die for other people – but we'll live for them. Through our actions, through our lives, they will benefit. They will know our love, and by knowing our love they will know God's love.

So what does it mean to lay down our lives for one another, then?

Jesus explains it in the gospel reading "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:10-13)

We need to remember that at this point in the gospel narrative, Jesus hadn't yet died: his ministry was still going on. And his disciples had seen Jesus's ministry – his life, in action. He was telling his disciples to love, as he had loved them.

So what was Jesus' ministry like?

Well, it wasn't like the other ministries of his time. It wasn't like the ministry of the scribes and the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

Instead of being like them, instead of adopting all their structures and rules, he bypassed them. Instead of judging the people that the Pharisees and others regarded as unacceptable, Jesus reached out to them.

Prostitutes. Lepers. Tax collectors. Women and foreigners. All the people who were marginalised and outcast by society. Jesus reached out to them – he loved them.

And they responded to that love.

That made the situation with the religious establishment, worse, of course.

Because people of the religious establishment like to judge. I think we all do, really, and it's really based on wanting to be slightly better than others. If we can point out faults in others, we can feel better about ourselves.

But rather than judging the undesirables and the outcasts, Jesus loved them.

He humbled himself, and he became their friend, and even their servant.

Just like rather than judging the world, God loved the world so much that he gave his only son to us.

Just like Jesus humbled himself, became truly human, to become one of us.

Which gives us a start on what it means to lay down our lives for one another.

As I reflected last week, if we know God's love, then it must show. We don't love people by saying we love them, we love people by our actions. If we see someone in need and have the means to help but choose not to, then we're not loving them.

Again, loving one another – laying down our lives for one another, is not about what we say – it's about what we do. We need to follow Jesus' example: We need to respond to people in need, just as Jesus did. We need to reach out to outcasts, just as Jesus did. And it means we need to humble ourselves, just as Jesus did.

We need to make time for others, even if they're not like us. We need to work on befriending those who we wouldn't normally be friends with.

There's a line that's often used in churches: Hate the sin but love the sinner. And at a theological level that's right; but so often I think that line is used to excuse or even permit hate. We need to make sure that our hate doesn't take priority over our love.

We need to see people's needs, and work to meet them. We need to see people's pain, and work to comfort them.

Jesus says in verse 12 "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."

Jesus came to lay down his life for us. And ultimately that was by dying for us on that cross at Calvary. But throughout his ministry, he laid down his life for others too. He fed the hungry. He loved the poor. He healed the sick. He cast out the evil influences on people's lives. He saved people from judgement. He went where the people were.

He took care of people's physical needs, their emotional needs and their spiritual needs. He took care of their immediate needs and their eternal needs.

Jesus loved and Jesus acted.

It's a hard thing for us to do, of course. We have limited capacity, we have limited resources and money, and we have limited time. We can't do everything – but Jesus' call isn't to do everything, it's to do something. So often, people are overwhelmed by the needs of others that they fail to respond.

Or when they do respond, they are criticised by others for not responding to different needs.

The problems of this world aren't going to go away through our actions – Jesus said, "You will always have the poor with you" (Mark 14:7). – but that doesn't mean we take no action. Instead, we alleviate suffering where we can, feed the hungry when we can and so on.

While we may feel guilty about all the things we can't do, if we are confident and doing what God wants us to do, we are empowered by God. Jesus says in verse 15 and 16 "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you."

In the gospels we see Jesus' love in action – laying down his life both in the actions of his ministry and in his death on the cross. At last supper when Jesus gave the disciples the new commandment – John 13: 34 "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another"

And here in Chapter 15 at the end of today's reading, Jesus shares that again – "This is my command: Love each other."

By following that command, others will recognise those that follow it as Jesus' disciples. Our love for one another, will show Jesus' love for us, and God's love for the whole.

If we love God, we will live the way God wants us to live, and if we live the way God wants us to live – if we love one another, if we lay down our lives for one another, we will be assured of God's love by the presence of the Holy Spirit in us.

Jesus says "Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

So, I wonder.... How is it that we may lay down our lives for others as St Ives Uniting Church? How might we lay down our lives for others as individuals?

There are many, many ways we do. The times we put others first, the times we give to others. We can't do everything, but we do what we can. We can't give every family in need in Sydney, but through supporting the work of Exodus in our weekly giving of food, we can help many of them. We can't help every everyone in need in the outback – but we can support Frontier services who minister to them.

We can give our time and energy and money to help those who worship here, and to those who might worship here. We can't reach out to the lonely and isolated of our city, but we can certainly reach out to the members of our congregation who can't get to church anymore. We pray for ourselves, but we pray for each other as well, and what's more, we pray for the whole world.

We can't do everything, but we can lay down our lives. We can, in so many ways, put our love into action.

So I ask, how are you going to put your love for one another into action this week?

Who are you going to reach out to?

Who are you going to help? Who are you going to comfort?

We won't solve all the problems of the world, but remember, that by loving one another, we will be showing God's love to the world.

And it's God's love that will ultimately solve all the problems of the world – For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

Amen.

